

An Image of Yesterday

by Brooks Kohler (2003)

Aunt Hester, or Nutty Hess as some called her, lived in a large white house obscured from common sight by two, large, weeping willows. She wasn't really my aunt, nor was she anyone else's that I knew. Yet, if you were aiming to tease someone, you designated Nutty Hess as the loving aunt.

She lived alone with only about fifteen to twenty cats to keep her company. My father used to joke that she was cat poor. We kids, though, just thought she was crazy. All night long, you could hear her cats hissing, moaning, and whining as cats do in the heat of passion. It was enough to make you sick! Even more amazing was the scene when Hess would come out and call each one by name. My own mother had trouble remembering me and my brother, and I wondered how on earth a woman like Hess Harper could possibly remember the names of twenty cats, especially when some of the toms remained gone for long stretches of time. Out of a town of fifteen hundred, I don't recall any cat wandering the streets that didn't look like Rufus, a Maltese, or Harry, a calico of sorts. But, then again, it was a small town.

Other than her propensity to adopt any stray that wandered into her yard, Hess was a pretty good woman. On warm days she always gave us cold cola, and this in a time when money was scarce! Coming out to her porch, she would wave her arm high in the air and motion for my friends and me to come near. Once we had climbed the steps and made our way through the sea of fur, Hess would open a large, wooden ice box full of cola bottles, each one cool and ripe for the picking. Eagerly, I remember plunging my hand down into the cold and pulling out a brown bottle. Helping me, Hess would pry off the lid.

“Yes!” I would say to myself, feeling the syrupy liquid flow down my throat. “This is heaven.”

My heaven, and my recognition of it, though, were stifled when I learned she had passed away. I was twenty-five, living in Montana on a sheep ranch, and barely making enough to afford a glass of water, let alone a cold cola.

The letter arrived late in the afternoon, since the mail usually took a while to find its owner. Tired

and weary eyed, I read the note, and the impact was probably more profound due to my state of mind. But, regardless of the time of day, I knew I had lost a part of my childhood. Nutty Hess had become a reference point in my life for judging everything eccentric, odd, or out of the norm.

Immediately, I ran to the manager's house, and with a little smooth talking and a bribe of Kentucky bourbon, he let me make the long distance phone call back to the little town in Southern Illinois that I called home.

"Hello."

"Yes, is Joe Walker there?"

"This is him."

"Hey, Joe, it's me! Michael!"

The static was loud, but it didn't stunt the intent of the conversation. I informed him that I was calling to learn about Hess, and he told me as much as he knew.

"She died in bed, Mike. She was found on a Monday morning by Mr. Simmons, and the funeral was two weeks ago."

The last part didn't surprise me since the

letter was late in getting to me. Nevertheless, I felt cheated, and I wished I could have been there. As he said goodbye, I waited to hear the sound of the phone being placed on the receiver.

With this, I sauntered back to my bunk, only to lie on my side for several hours before finally falling asleep. One thing I had learned about hard work was that if you didn't take sleep when it was warranted, sometimes it never came. "Too tired to sleep? Too tired to sheep," was a common saying amongst the men with whom I worked. As dawn broke, and my mind was stolen away from a dream, it would be another day of earning a pay check and having no recollection that I had.

Fed up with my situation, I packed my bags a week later, taking with me whatever I could shove into a suitcase. The guys, concerned about my attitude, pitched in and bought me a bus ticket.

Sonny, an older fella who had drifted in from Boise even gave me a few dollars for spending, with the only stipulation being that I not gamble or buy any alcohol with it. Gladly, I took the money with the promise that when I saw him again, I'd pay him

back. Inside though, he knew we'd probably never meet again. At night, Sonny's lungs ached from years of smoking. By late afternoon, his handkerchief was stained red. Like Hess, his image would forever be with me, and as the bus left the depot, I made a vow never to forget his act of kindness. I never have.

In the morning of April 14, 1956, my nose caught the scent of Harlan's Bakery, located on South Street. I was home. Making my way down Main Street, faces of familiarity stared back at me as though they were asking themselves if they should say hello.

In the window of Paisley Drug Store, I stopped to check my hair. The last time I did this I was eighteen and thinking nothing of impressing anyone I knew. Reflecting back on that day, it seemed almost impossible that I would have been gullible enough to think I could find better than the place I called home. So, for the remainder of the afternoon, I took the time to become reacquainted with the town I so desired to leave, and eventually, I stumbled into Pete Jackson and Stonewall

Crawford, two old classmates of mine at the Union Jack Café.

The Union Jack wasn't really much of an eatery. More than anything, it was simply a place to smoke, drink coffee, and catch up on the day's gossip. On any given day, except Sunday, you could find at the Jack local notables: the sheriff, a few deputies, county commissioners, and others who considered themselves to be important. By nightfall, the common folk moved in, enjoying the same foam-cushioned stools and heavily varnished benches that the hierarchy of the community enjoyed by day.

I had only been gone six years, but from the looks of the place, nothing had changed. Those who weren't as restless as I continued to patronize the establishment, and those who didn't had either passed on or given up socializing for a stay-at-home-dinner with the family.

As the little bells that dangled over the door announced my arrival, the faces all turned toward the door. Once again I was treated to the same hospitality I had received on the street, and many

of them resumed eating as I made my way toward Pete and Stonewall.

“Well, I’ll be a son-of-a-gun!” shouted Stonewall, jumping from his seat and taking my hand into his. “If it isn’t Michael Cohen! Looky here, Pete! I think this fella’s lost!”

“Yeah,” replied Pete, “I think he is!”

I couldn’t do anything but smile. They were glad to see me, and I was glad to see them. Pulling a chair up for me, Stonewall called the waitress over.

“Get whatever you want, Mike. This one’s on me!”

“That’s okay, Stonewall. All I want is coffee.”

“No, now I insist. You order it, and I’ll pay for it.”

“No, I insist. You keep your money. You don’t think I left here to come back flat busted, do ya?”

A small roar of laughter and few crude comments came from both of them before they settled down.

“Here you go, Hon. One coffee and a cup of milk.”

“So, Mikey, what brings you back here?” asked

Pete.

“Hess Harper.”

“What? Hess Harper? No, really, what brings you back?”

“Hess Harper,” I continued. “I received a letter saying she had passed away, and I came home to pay my respects.”

“Let me get this straight,” interrupted Stonewall. “You mean to tell me that you came back to this po-dunk town because some goofy old lady who used to own a bunch of cats died?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s about the most ignorant thing I’ve ever heard.”

Stonewall was a friend, a good friend, but he never knew when to quit. Like his father, he was a braggart, the type of person who claims to have done something when he hadn’t. I had dated some of the same girls he had, so I knew he was a liar. His comment about Hess was as much about him as it was about her, and although we were older, his maturity level didn’t reflect his age. Knowing full well his intent, I didn’t give in to his plan to suck me

into a conversation of belittling a woman who had already been done that way for most of her life. Without taking a drink of my coffee, I tossed fifty cents down and walked out.

Behind me, I could feel their eyes on me as I walked away. Someone in the corner asked who I was, while another mumbled out a name that obviously wasn't mine.

Standing on the sidewalk, I peered down the street. The afternoon sun was now at a level to cast a warm, orange glow over everything. Pushing my hand down deep into my pocket, I pulled out two dollars, a wadded up stick of gum, and few bits of change that weren't worth the effort it would take to toss them into a wishing well! Lifting the suitcase, I made my way toward the old homeplace; it wasn't much, but I was looking forward to seeing it.

Along the way, a group of quail took to flight from a clump of bushes alongside the road. Quickly before my eyes they sprang, and I never noticed the copperhead sunning itself next to my right foot. Moving slowly, I walked forward until I was able to make a break for it. Looking back, the snake was

gone, both of us now looking for a place to call home.

As I suspected, money was tight; the house still looked as it did the day I left for Montana. Flaking paint clung desperately to the siding, like tiny rolls of parchment meticulously placed for visual effect. What visual effect given, though, was hardly the appearance of a family well off. In the yard, the grass was high and patchy in spots with weeds of all varieties. The once firm concrete walkway was now little more than a path of broken chunks, layered in mud where the rain had caused puddles to form.

“Michael?” I turned around to see a boy holding a fishing rod in his left hand and a stringer of fish in his right.

“David!”

He walked over to me, slowly making his approach. “Mom and Dad told me you were coming home,” he said.

“Well, well, you’ve done some growing.”

“Yeah, you, too. Still a fool though, aren’t ya?”

He chuckled as he placed the rod and the fish

down into the tall grass.

“Smoke?”

“What?” I asked.

“Smoke? You want one?”

“How old are you now? Fifteen? Fifteen and a half?”

“You still are a fool, Michael Cohen. I’m almost seventeen.”

He walked away, laughing, a cigarette dangling from between his fingers. He stopped halfway to the door and looked back at me.

“Well, ain’t you comin’, or are you goin’ to stand there all night?”

I followed him, my senses now on full alert. The house, as I remembered, was always toasty. This evening was no exception. Dad loved his heat, even in the summer months. Mom didn’t appreciate it any, but for my father, she tolerated it.

They were hard working people of German stock, the kind of folks who wanted to be left alone. Six days a week, they struggled to make a living. Sunday was the only day that I remember they did nothing except gorge themselves on sauerkraut and

Polish sausage. My mother would spend the entire weekend preparing the meal. The house would take on an odor that was almost unbearable at times, but the memory of that boiled sauerkraut stewed with the meat of fine sausage haunted me a lot of times, especially when all I had to eat for dinner was fried bologna and a slice of bread without mustard or ketchup.

As he opened the front door, David flicked the cigarette from his hand. A blast of dry heat hit me hard. Sweat formed on my brow almost immediately. Dropping the suitcase behind me, I was stunned that Mom had done some decorating while I was gone. Pictures of family members I'd never known, or those deceased, adorned the walls. The old couch was draped with a quilt I had never seen before, and the floor of the room was exceptionally clean.

“Mom! Dad! Michael's home!”

Out of my right ear I heard the slamming of the screen door leading to the kitchen and the movement of feet hurrying across the floor.

“Michael!” shouted my mother in excitement. She grabbed me and held on tightly, without saying a word.

“Hey, Son,” said my father, walking behind her, a grin on his face as big as a crescent moon. “How in the world are ya?”

“Hey, Pa.”

Mom backed up from me and held on to my arms.

“Well, Jim, I believe he’s grown some.”

“Lost weight, too,” said David, laughing as he passed my mother heading toward the kitchen.

“David,” my mother asked suspiciously, “have you been smoking?”

“No, Mom. I was with Seth and the fellas. They were smokin’.”

“Are you sure?”

David looked at me. I could tell that they had already had this conversation on a previous date.

“Yeah, Mom,” I interjected, backing him up to the best of my ability. “I met David coming up the road. Some of the boys were smoking.”

She took her eyes off him and then looked at

me. “Well, okay, if you say so, Michael. You’re the older one here, and I don’t think you’d lie to me, would ya?”

My mother, bless her soul, always ended a statement with a question. She didn’t know what it did to me, but if David was my brother, I’m sure he did. It was as though she knew, but was willing to forget any wrong we did, as long somebody else would ease her conscience. Usually that role fell to my father, who on several occasions got me off the hook when I had liquor on my breath. But now that job was placed on me, and in doing so, I felt as though I had lost a little something of my boyhood charm.

With a firm slap to my arm, my father bent down, grabbed my suitcase, and said, “Aw, enough of this. Come on, Michael. I’ve got something I want to show you.”

As he ushered me away from my mother, she gave a look of concern. I wasn’t sure if she knew I had lied to defend my over-anxious brother, but I felt as if she did.

Apparently, Mom wasn’t the only person

doing a little redecorating while I had been gone. Leading me to my old room, my father pushed open the door to reveal a desk and some chairs.

“Wow! Dad, it looks like you’re in business.”

At first, I didn’t know how to take it. My room was gone! Any resemblance of it was now obscured by shelving for books I was sure my father hadn’t read, and in the center, resting on a large circle rug sat an old, brown office desk.

“What do ya think?” he asked, with his eyes widened when he asked me. I didn’t know what else to say but “Great!” Then I paused and came back with a hesitant, “I think.”

Without buying into my reluctance to accept what he had done, he grabbed me by the arm and led me toward the door.

“I’ve got something to show you that will make you understand,” he said.

He took me through the kitchen and out the back door. Standing there in the yard, my eyes were treated to what seemed to be hundreds of old wash tubs. The thought went through my mind that my father had finally arrived at the pinnacle of his life,

trading in what I believed to be sanity for a more sedated life of relaxation at the state hospital.

“Dad,” I asked, “what is all this?”

“Worms.”

“Worms?”

“That’s right, Michael. Worms. Hundreds of thousands of the little devils.”

“In the tubs?”

“Yes, in the tubs.”

With a sigh, I pushed my hands through my hair and looked back at the house.

“What is it?” he asked.

I didn’t know how to tell him, so I didn’t. Looking into his eyes, I could tell that he was convinced that these worms were the answer to all their woes.

“You got a market?” I asked.

Once again, the confidence came back to his face. We walked over to the closest unit and he removed the plywood lid, constructed in a manner proving that it had been built with pride.

“See, Michael? They like it cool and dark.”

“Yeah, Pa. I see that.”

Inside, I knew he was serious. He wasn't the kind of person to start something to see it fail, but the thought of a grown man having to sell worms for a living made me sick! It downright made me angry! There simply wasn't anything here for a person! I wasn't a worm, and I didn't like it cool and dark!

In the end, I shuffled what I had seen into that file I kept in my mind labeled: THE MANY REASONS I LEFT HOME. Biting my tongue, I graciously conceded to his dream and let him ramble on for the next hour about what he wanted for Mom and David. It was a bargain I couldn't avoid and one I knew would make him happy.

As dawn broke, I found myself lying half-naked in a pile of sweat-drenched sheets. This was funny, I thought, because I had gone to bed with only one. Sometime during the night, my mother, in her concern for me not catching my death, had ever so cautiously placed one sheet after the other over me. In my mind I could see her, sneaking up to the bed, looking at me, examining where to start, and then flinging the sheet out so it would land as a

feather aimlessly falling to the ground. Then, she would walk away only to return an hour later to do the same. It was her way, and though it annoyed me, part of me felt content that she cared so much. Nights in a Montana bunkhouse could get pretty cold, with the only relief outside a dirty quilt being the camp hound to snuggle up with. I was more than happy to sweat the night away rather than to awake to the smell of doggy breath, even if I had kicked most of the sheets off in a desperation to keep from suffocating.

Once I had collected myself, it was a fast jog to the bathroom and then the kitchen. David was sitting at the table, along with my father and Jim Townsend, our neighbor. Jim looked up at me and took a long drink from his cup, all the while pointing his finger at me as he tried to wash his eggs down with his milk. Finished, he firmly placed the cup down and rubbed his belly, releasing a muffled burp from his lips.

“Well, boy,” he said, gasping as he did, “how you doin’?”

“Fine, Jim, and you?”

“Oh, I can’t complain,” he said, patting his stomach and reaching for a toothpick.

Out of all the people who could have stopped by that morning, I don’t know why it had to be Jim Townsend. A few months before I left, he had caught me with his oldest daughter, Ginger, kissing down by the creek. Seeing him sitting there, his belly all full of bacon and eggs, not to mention a half gallon of milk, I couldn’t help but remember that day when I lifted my head and saw him standing in front of us. I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Ginger,” I said, quietly. “It’s your pa.”

Ginger released her lips and turned around to see her father’s eyes staring angrily at the two of us. For nearly a week nobody saw her, and without mention, my days of smooching were over.

“So, you married?” Jim asked.

His ill-timed question brought me back to the moment.

“No. Why?”

Jim laughed and stood up, pulling hard on his belt when he did.

“Well, I gotta get goin’, folks.”

“See ya, Jim,” I said, trying not to sound too pleased that he was leaving.

In a glance of pardon, he looked back at me and grinned. David tapped me on the shoulder and winked. Both Jim and my father had stepped outside. My mother had wandered off to another part of the house.

“So, Michael, are you married?” asked David, laughing in such a frenzy that he nearly caused himself to choke.

With a firm hand I slapped him on the back of the head.

“Hey!” he shouted. “What the heck was that for?”

“You know why! Keep your mouth shut about the Ginger thing!”

“What Ginger thing?”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have hit my kid brother. Maybe he didn’t know about Ginger and me. After an hour or so, what I had done took a major toll on me. I loved my brother, even if he didn’t know it.

Traveling, you see all kinds of people. Their

faces tell stories. Some have lost loves, others have lost children, men have pasts they want to forget, and there are those who never created one.

If I left town without making amends, it would haunt me. Sleep would become a thing of the past, and finally an ache would settle into my gut that would sit and fester. There was no way I was going to live with that! No, I was taught that blood was thicker than water. It would be a cold day in Hades before I lived with that sin.

David and I stepped off the front porch and made our way toward Hess's place. Along the way, he bummed me a smoke, telling me about his wild adventures as a teenager in our little town of three thousand and asking me about Montana and what it was like to shear sheep. As we walked, I could tell that he, too, had the rambling spirit within him. He had already drunk his first beer, already hopped a train just for the fun of it, and, yes, like me, he had kissed a girl, but only one, he assured me. In essence, he was a bright and shining image of myself.

I didn't know whether to feel like a role model

or a menace. If he had done those things, I applauded him for his veracity, but curiosity is what killed the cat. I gave him a warning about a fella I knew out west, but the thought of a slow, painful death did nothing to stifle the joy he took in his achievement. He wore them proudly like medals, his eyes glistening when he'd name off names of those who had shared in the experiences. Like great battles, he went into graphic detail, only to leave me hanging at the moment of victory.

In this, I can honestly say I did not share. David was young and full of energy, but he had not reached that point in his young life where he would start reflecting. The road had also taught me something else. We pay for what we do in life, by losing the map, or by being too arrogant to follow it.

Hess had lived in a large, two-story home that consisted of a wraparound porch and a series of windows. As a boy, I was always amazed with how nice it looked. The yard was kept mowed down, and the house was well preserved with white paint. Out of all the homes in our little community, only Hess

and the mayor could boast of homes of such stature. Although we didn't appreciate it then, taking our modest dwellings for castles, Hess Harper had set the bar when it came to luxurious living. She may have smelled like pine trees, with her face a powder keg of make-up, but she was a good woman, and once I found myself standing in her yard again, all I could do was stand in awe.

"Michael? Michael? You okay?"

I looked at David, who in his relaxed mood, threw his cigarette onto the ground.

"Pick that up," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Do it!"

Reluctantly, he bent down and mumbled something.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Nothing," he replied, softly.

Studying the home, I noticed that the front door was open. Something was odd about the open door because there weren't any cars nearby.

"Come on."

We walked up to the porch, climbed the steps,

and peered through the windows.

“Do you see anybody?” I asked.

“No,” said David, “do you?”

“No, I can’t see anything except...”

“Hmmm!”

I turned to my left to see a sandy haired, freckled-faced young woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties, tapping her foot against the floor boards. Without going any further, let me stop by saying my jaw dropped, and my heart began to race. David stood, as stunned as I, and the noonday sun became a little brighter for both of us.

In the end, we spent the remainder of the day learning about who “Nutty Hess” really was. As it turned out, she wasn’t nutty at all. Her love for cats came from living in Paris when she was a girl. By the time she was in her mid-twenties, she was already a well-known pianist, playing concerts in New York, London, and Paris. She even played for the Queen of England, and to back up the claim, we were shown photos of a younger, more attractive Hester Harper.

In fact, her name wasn’t actually Hess or

Hester. It was Hildegarde, a name she received from her grandmother, but the name, she believed, would detract from her fame. In a strategic move, she changed her name to Hester, but kept her grandmother's given name. Over time, people began calling her Hess, and the name stuck.

As for the young woman on the porch, her visit was short, simply one of passing through, as so many people do. But somewhere she's out there as a spectator in a musty concert hall, a lover of the piano, and an image in someone's heart. Perhaps, she's here with me. But who knows? Who's to say that when you put on your favorite piano music, or grace the ivory keys, that she's not there with you? Perhaps she will be whispering in your ear, reminding you of a time much simpler, a day of youth so many never know.

THE END

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This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are a coincidence.

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